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Special Edition

WCC DELEGATION PREDICTS CLOSER RELATIONS WITH USSR CHURCHES

(Geneva) - The general secretary of the World Council of Churches predicted "closer relations" between churches in the USSR and the WCC on the return here today of a five-member World Council delegation from a 2 weeks visit in Russia.

Dr. W.A. Visser 't Hooft told reporters at the Geneva airport that there had been no official "negotiations" with the Moscow Patriarchate of the Russian Orthodox Church or with the Lutherans, Armenians and Baptists, with whom the delegation also talked.

However, he said, "the future of our contacts was always the main subject of discussion". He predicted that the "get acquainted" process begun at a meeting of representatives of the WCC and the Moscow Church at Utrecht, Netherlands, in August 1958, would lead to more visits and exchanges of information.

"We are still in a period of getting to understand each other better", he emphasized.

Dr. Visser 't Hooft said the delegation had been received everywhere "with great cordiality". In addition to talks at the Moscow headquarters of the Orthodox Church, the group took part in liturgies and worship services and visited the Orthodox theological academies in Zagorsk and Leningrad. Dr. Visser 't Hooft spoke in the Moscow church of the Metropolitan Nikolai of Krutitsy and Kolomna. He and another delegation member, U Kyaw Than of Burma, addressed a congregation in the Baptist Church.

In Riga, where delegation members also preached, they met the archbishops of the Lutheran churches of Latvia and Estonia. In Moscow they conferred with Baptist leaders.

A 2½-day stay at Etchmiadzin in Soviet Armenia included talks, for the first time, with the Supreme Catholicos of the Armenian Church, in sight of Mount Ararat, traditional resting place of Noah's Ark after the flood.

Reporting a welcome of "overwhelming cordiality" by the worshippers in churches, the World Council's general secretary said the delegation was greeted with "songs, shouts of welcome, the waving of handkerchiefs and joy at being with Christians of other churches".

However, he warned that it was impossible to sum up in a few minutes "the very complicated situation of the Church in Russia. Every moment in a Communist country the Church exists in a situation that is not at all Christian, but based on an entirely other ideology", he said. "Moreover there is active anti-religious propaganda".

He continued: "Given these known facts we were impressed by all this Church is and does. Within this framework there is a very intense spiritual life, a convinced faith and a developed and impressive worship". He confirmed reports of other observers that "the churches were filled, and not only for our visit, but every Sunday, and in many places on week-days".

Dr. Visser 't Hooft said there were many students in the theological academies and that "applications for entry are refused if the candidates are not up to the standard required to become priests".

A second member of the WCC delegation, Dr. O. Frederick Nolde, the director of the Commission of the Churches on International Affairs, stressed that the visit had "no political purposes".

"It is nevertheless a fact", he continued, "that we established personal relations in an atmosphere of warm friendship and on the basis of common Christian faith. This in itself is a significant contribution to better international relations", he declared.

Dr. Nolde said there had been informal conversations with church leaders and on a few occasions with government officials of the Council of Religious Affairs about current international problems, including disarmament.

"We emphasized that it is not enough to say we are for peace and against war", Dr. Nolde said. "It is necessary to attack the root causes of war and prevent or stop limited military conflicts carrying with them the danger of enlargement".

"We also said it is not enough to demand independence for colonial peoples", the CCIA director affirmed, "because there are non-colonial peoples living under a foreign yoke who are not permitted by free and popular vote to choose their government and elect their own officials".

Dr. Nolde said more contacts would be needed to reach agreement on such points and that the churches must have "freedom publicly to express the agreements reached". He said "to do this requires the further development of open societies and further relaxation of international tension".

Dr. Nolde said that in conversations the delegation stressed the World Council's position that "there must be freedom to advance to constructive positions and to criticize governments when they threaten peace, justice and freedom".

Dr. Visser 't Hooft noted that the five-member delegation, coming from five different countries and representing five different churches, was the "first fully international ecumenical group" ever to visit the USSR. In addition to Dr. Visser 't Hooft, who is a member of the Reformed Church of the Netherlands, the group was composed of: The Rev. Francis House, WCC associate general secretary, British, a member of the Church of England; Dr. Nick Nissiotis, assistant director of the WCC's Ecumenical Institute, Bossey, Switzerland, Greek, a member of the Greek Orthodox Church; Dr. O. Frederick Nolde, New York, New York, director of the Commission of the Churches on International Affairs, a joint agency of the

WCC and the International Missionary Council, United States, a member of the United Lutheran Church in America; and U. Kyaw Than, Rangoon, Burma, Baptist, administrative secretary of the East Asia Christian Conference. Mr. Alexandre de Weymarn, a research officer in the WCC's General Secretariat, accompanied the delegation as interpreter.

The visit to the USSR was one in a series resulting from last year's Utrecht meeting. In June of this year two representatives of the Moscow Patriarchate spent four weeks in Geneva conferring with World Council officials. They were Archpriest Vitaly M. Borovoy, of Vilna, a lecturer in early church history at the Leningrad Theological Academy, and Mr. Victor S. Alexeev, a lay secretary in the Moscow Patriarchate's office for inter-church relations. Later, in August, they both attended as observers the meeting of the WCC's policy-making Central Committee on the Island of Rhodes.

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(See texts of farewell speeches page 4.)

Texts of Farewell Speeches

The Patriarch Alexius of the Moscow Church and WCC general secretary Dr. W.A. Visser 't Hooft made speeches at a farewell dinner in Moscow on December 17. The dinner was attended by many Orthodox clergy in Moscow, by the Metropolitan Nikolai of Krutitsy and Kolomna, head of the Russian church's Department of External Relations, and by representatives of the Baptist churches and of the Soviet Government's Council of Religious Affairs.

Speech of Dr. W.A. Visser 't Hooft

On this last day of our visit to the Holy Orthodox Church of Russia we are most glad to have the opportunity to give expression to our deep gratitude to your Holiness for a number of benefactions which have been bestowed on us. We thank you first of all for the invitation to pay this visit to the Church of Russia. We thank you for the truly fraternal reception given to us. We thank you for the opportunity to come to know the spiritual life of the Church as it expressed itself above all in its services of worship to Almighty God and to our Lord Jesus Christ. We thank you for the opportunity given to us to meet also the Lutheran, Armenian and Baptist Churches with which your Church entertains fraternal relationship. We thank you above all for the fact that wherever we went we were received as brethren who belong to one and the same family of believers in our common Lord and Saviour.

It is the purpose of the World Council to be an instrument of that gathering together of the children of God for which, according to St. John's gospel, our Lord gave His life. And we hope that our little delegation, representing as it does five different churches, has been a sign and token of the realization of that purpose.

It is the great privilege of Christians that when they meet together they find that, whatever may be the difference in language, in culture, in national history, they have a common basis which makes them recognize each other as children of one Father, and brothers for whom the Saviour died. We have had the happy experience that because of this common basis we found a common spiritual language between the faithful of your Church and ourselves. That is also the reason why in our informal discussions about the relationships between the Orthodox Church of Russia and the World Council of Churches it was not difficult to arrive at an understanding concerning the next steps which are to be taken. We are happy to hear that your Holy Synod has already approved further measures to increase direct contacts and interchange and we do not doubt that in the coming years the relationships will grow increasingly profitable for both sides.

We leave with deep thankfulness in our hearts for the faithful devotion of Christians in whose worship we have shared. Our hope for the future of the Church of Christ in Russia is based upon the scriptural truth that the Word of God is not bound and will continue its saving work in the future as it has in the past. Your church as well as other churches in the Soviet Union have shown in troubled times that they live by that power which comes from the Holy Spirit and this power is eternal and ever creative. All churches in the world have entered into a period of history in which their faith will be tested. The changes in the social and cultural situation create new conditions in which the faith once delivered to the saints will have to be expressed in new forms. We will all together have to find the right answers to these new needs and we cherish the hope that your church with its age-old tradition may, in that process, be found to renew its strength.

Our visit to the Holy Orthodox Church of Russia has no political purposes. Nevertheless the very fact that personal contacts have been established in a spirit of friendship and Christian understanding is an important contribution to better international relations. The World Council of Churches reflects the concern of its member churches, which they also express on their own behalf - for the promotion of peace, justice and freedom. Through the Commission of the Churches on International Affairs it maintains day to day contact with government officials who are responsible for international decisions and seeks to make constructive proposals concerning the solution of international problems. In offering this Christian testimony, the World Council steers its course between two unacceptable extremes. On the one hand, it refuses identification with any political ideology or national position and it avoids political entanglements. On the other hand, it cannot rest content with vague generalities because it knows that men often have cried "peace, peace" when there is no peace. The Christian witness must therefore be addressed to the concrete realities of the ever-contemporaneous situation in order to express more fully in human relations God's will for peace, justice and freedom on earth. And the churches are called to teach/only when all nations are willing to make sacrifices in the cause of peace do they have the right to expect that they will enjoy the fruits of peace.

In all their work together in the World Council the member churches seek to share with one another the diversity of spiritual gifts which they have been given by the One Spirit for their mutual enrichment and mutual correction. And as the Executive Committee wrote to Your Holiness in 1955 at the beginning of the new contacts which led to the present happy relationships, the other Churches in the Council specially value the rich contributions already made by the Orthodox Churches.

They ardently desire to receive from the Russian Orthodox Church also the fruits of its rich history and contemporary Christian experience. We thank God for all the treasures of mystical experience and practical obedience in daily life; of liturgical community life and personal commitment; of the inheritance of the certainties of the Faith and of interpretation of the eternal verities in ways which are meaningful for this generation.

Our prayer as we part is that all that has passed between us during the last eighteen months and especially during this visit, may lead to a fuller sharing of all these treasures for the peace and unity of the whole Church of Christ and the fulfillment of its mission in the world.



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Speech of Patriarch Alexius

We are glad to welcome the dear guests of the Russian Orthodox Church, our brethren in Christ, representing the Christian churches united around the World Council of Churches, on the Russian soil at the altars of ancient Orthodox shrines.

The Russian Orthodox Church looks on with sympathy at the efforts of our Christian brethren to overcome centuries-old divisions and to reunite men who worship God in different ways for working together in God's field. Our Church will help them in that task.

Studying your already considerable achievements in that good work has been to us a source of consolation and deep spiritual satisfaction. We shall invoke God's blessing upon your efforts in the future. We shall strengthen our spiritual friendship while endeavouring to reveal to you the treasures of our ancient faith transmitted to us by the Apostles and Fathers of the Church.

You have had the opportunity of seeing yourselves the piety and devoutness of the faithful people of God in our filled churches. You have been able to see how important liturgical life and common prayer is to us, Orthodox Christians. Our strength lies in the sacraments of the Church through the mystery of which comes the unseen but the real presence of the Lord Himself among us.

This remains perhaps beyond the comprehension of those observers who, seeing the Russian Church from outside, express their astonishment because of her vitality. That strength does not come from ourselves. It proceeds from the quickening grace of the Holy Ghost, and is due to the guidance of Divine Providence leading Christ's Church by ways inscrutable, known to God alone; thus we believe that separation of our church from the state has been accomplished for the good of the church.

The relations of the Russian Church with the Christian world at large, beyond the boundaries of our country, have been strengthened in recent years. Bonds of fraternity and friendship have been tightened with Christians of all denominations.

Our Church welcomes and supports in the contemporaneous world all things that help to strengthen world peace, to improve mutual understanding between men and to build human society on love, freedom and justice.

We witness with great satisfaction that much has been done in this respect. Still more could be done in the future if all men of good will should unite their efforts in this direction.

Remaining above all in communion of prayer and canon law with our sister-churches, the autocephalous national branches of the Universal Orthodox Church, we pray for the re-union of all Christian churches. We are induced to do so by our Lord's commandment about oneness of men in the bond of peace and love.

That is the supreme goal of the World Council of Churches. And, as its General Secretary Dr. Visser 't Hooft has stressed, the World Council of Churches is not a "World Church" and its purpose is to promote unity exclusively by spiritual means and with full recognition of the independence and particular charisma of each Church and each creed. We trust that the day will come when all may be one, when our Saviour's promise will be fulfilled: "and there shall be one flock and one Shepherd" (St. John, X, 16).

